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ABSTRACT

Certain aspects of the dropout problem, specifically the relationships between certain characteristics of handicapped and nonhandicapped dropout populations, were examined. A group of eight school districts which had special education projects funded through the Texas Education Agency participated in data collection of demographic variables and interviews of dropouts. Results revealed several distinct differences between handicapped and nonhandicapped dropouts in the sample. Of the characteristics of the handicapped group, three of the most distinct were failure to make the junior-to-senior-high-school transition, lack of future plans, and more positive views of the educational system. Suggestions for utilizing these differences in educational decision making are made, including earlier identification of potential dropouts in order to provide remediation and/or intervention programs, and provision for exit counseling and career awareness for all dropouts. (KA)

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HANDICAPPED AND NONHANDICAPPED SCHOOL DROPOUTS*

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This study was an attempt to examine certain aspects of the dropout problem and to specifically study the relationships between certain characteristics within a handicapped and non-handicapped population.

A review of the existing research as contained in educational literature was undertaken which identified characteristics common among secondary school dropouts, described reasons given as influential in the decision to leave school, and described those educational programs which have been used in other settings for remediation, retention, early identification, and other intervention approaches in dealing with the dropout problem.

Eight school districts which had special education projects funded through the Texas Education Agency agreed to participate in data collection. These districts reflected a wide range of the population of the state of Texas. Two of the schools were suburban schools, one with a middle class population and one with a lower middle class population. One school was located in rural northeast Texas, two were located in rural middle Texas, and one was a rural southeast Texas school. The remaining schools consisted of an inner city high school and a high school located in the valley region of Texas in a town which has a small university. Although the population was not randomly selected, it is reflective of many school districts in Texas. Additionally, it is also reflective of a more rural population than is found in other studies of school dropouts. The high proportion of inner city school dropouts has tended to cause a concentration on urban rather than rural subjects.

Two limitations should be noted in addition to the nonrandom sample. Data collection was completed by the individual project staff members. Although the researchers provided a definition of the characteristics to be identified and detailed the procedures to be followed during on-site visits, direct control over the actual data collection was not possible.

Secondly, the actual number of dropouts in each district was not available. The districts had difficulty in identifying accurate information for various reasons. Some of the reasons were lack of school records on dropouts and on their subsequent activities, transfer students who may or may not be attending school elsewhere, and students who left school and then re-entered. However, all of the project directors agreed that the school superintendent's report to the Texas Education Agency did not reflect the true number of dropouts. The actual incidence of dropouts was higher than this figure. Therefore, the researchers have no way of deciding what size sample was reflected by the reported cases. It should be noted that the researchers found that considerable inconsistency in reporting students who left school during the June 1 to August 31 period existed. Unless a request was made for records, these students were frequently not reported as a school leaver.

Each of the eight school districts was asked to identify all of their dropouts from May 1976 through April 1977. This identification procedure was completed for May 1976 through January 1977, and then continued during the remaining school year.

Several of the districts chose to use only a portion of their total dropout population because of lack of personnel available as compared to dropout numbers.

In addition to 22 demographic variables, (See Table I) several projects agreed to personally interview a number of dropouts using a scheduled interview format. During the interviews, these dropouts were asked.

1. Is there anything the school could have done to make your leaving more difficult?

2. Which subjects in school did you feel were most important? least important?

3. Why did you drop out of school?

4. Attitude questions directed toward possible intervention programs, school programs, and school personnel.

A total of 237 individual dropout cases were obtained. Of these cases 111, or 47 percent, were identified as non-handicapped and 126, or 53 percent, were identified as handicapped. Learning disabled or educable mentally retarded accounted for the majority of the handicapping conditions.

Although 237 cases were recorded, all of the information on each factor was not available. Therefore, the number of respondents on each factor varies. Table I contains the percent of total responses of non-handicapped and handicapped dropouts reported primarily from school records.

Some differences can be noted between the two groups. There were more handicapped males. The racial classifications were relatively equal. Marital status was also fairly even. Age at exit tended to be similar between groups. The most prevalent age categories were 16, 17, and 18. Most of the dropouts left school in 10th or 11th grade, although the handicapped also had a high number who left in 9th grade.

The number of days absent was in excess of 15 for 45% of the sample in junior high and 57% in senior high. In both cases, the handicapped group had a larger occurrence of absenteeism.

I.Q. level was consistent with the population. The two largest handicapping conditions were educable mentally retarded and learning disabled. The non-handicapped group, however, had a number of students with I.Q. scores under 90. Reading level estimates were consistent with I.Q. scores. Eighty-two percent of the handicapped group were two years behind grade level in reading. The majority of the handicapped group was below 10th grade placement. This indicated a failure of many of these students to make the transition from junior to senior high school. In the non-handicapped group, the range of grade placement at exit was more evenly distributed.

The number of courses failed during the last school year had a fairly even distribution for both groups. However, 59% of the entire population failed five or more courses. This in itself may have been a major contribution in the decision to leave school or in preventing reentry.

The home environment of the two groups was relatively similar. The majority of parents were not high school graduates themselves. Their occupational pursuits tended to be in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. A number of the mothers were housewives. Generally family size was small, between 1 and 3 children. Economic status was most often estimated as low. However, 69% of the dropouts in this study come from families where both parents were present.

The descriptors on school environment showed a number of differences between the non-handicapped and handicapped groups. Both groups had large incidences of school disciplinary records.

When asked what the school could do to retard school leaving or to facilitate reentry, the non-handicapped group answered "counseling" or "nothing". In contrast, the handicapped group requested placement in special programs ans jobs as well as counseling. This may have been an indication of the need for financially assisted job programs.

The future plans of the two groups differed. The non-handicapped group tended to have "some" plans for reenrollment, passing the G.E.D. test or full-time work most often cited. The handicapped group tended to have "no" future plans, which appeared to indicate a need to offer exit counseling to this group. Enrollment in vocational programs for both groups was low. However, the handicapped group did have the higher portion of enrollees.

Table II contains the percent of responses to those questions which were specific to the interviews. Approximately 50 interviews were conducted with dropouts. These interviews were in addition to the above listed variables obtained from school records. Although all interviews were not complete, all possible responses were used. A greater number of handicapped than non-handicapped students were interviewed. These questions centered on attitudinal type data and on programs that schools might institute for dropout prevention.

Concerning class subjects, math and vocational courses were listed as the most important by the handicapped group while math and social studies were listed as the most important by the non-handicapped group. In opposition, the handicapped group listed math as the most disliked subject while English and math were listed exclusively by the non-handicapped group.

The responses to the question of what the school does best is different for the two groups. The main idea given by the non-handicapped group is help in finding employment. The handicapped group was more aware of the teaching/learning process. Vocational education was also listed as a need. Ninety-two percent of the respondents desired more vocational training and placement.

The need for vocational programs was also reflected in the responses to "what the school could do to make leaving more difficult." The non-handicapped responses were in two areas only - extra help with school work and job placement. The handicapped group responded in the areas of teacher interest, possibilities of alternate graduation plans, and vocational placement. This was reflected in the responses to teacher and principal's attitudes. The majority of responses for teachers were in "hard to talk to" or "unconcerned." Only 26% of the total sample viewed the teacher as "helpful," with the majority of these responses from the handicapped group. Principals were viewed more positively, with 55% of the total responses in the "helpful" category.

The last question concerned the reasons given for dropping out of school. These reasons were fairly parallel for the two groups. The non-handicapped group responded most often that full-time employment was the major reason for leaving school. The handicapped group responded in the financial need categories. Although these responses were not identical, they did reflect similar financial need. Both groups desired employment, but the non-handicapped group seemed more aware of job placement than did the handicapped group. This was another support for the needs of the handicapped in the areas of exit counseling and vocational placement.

In conclusion, several distinct differences between handicapped and non-handicapped dropouts in this sample were noted. Three of the most distinct characteristics of the handicapped group were failure to make the junior to senior high school transition, lack of future plans, and more positive views of the educational system.

These differences can be used in educational decision making in a number of ways. First, there is a need for earlier identification of potential dropouts in order to provide remediation and/or intervention programs. Second, provision for exit counseling and career awareness is needed by all dropouts. However, the need appears to be more acute for the handicapped. Lastly, there are growing pressures as a result of court decisions and federal statutes to provide suitable educational programs for the attainment of minimal adult functional skills to all citizens desiring them through age 21.

Additional Information on the entire research study can be obtained from:

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TABLE I

PERCENT OF RESPONSES ON SCHOOL RECORD INFORMATION

ITEM		NON	HANDI
Sex -	Male	24	35
	Female		
Race -	White	21	21
	Black	3	7
	Mexican American	18	30
Married -	Yes	27	15
	No	27	31
Age at exit-	10-14	2	4
	15	3	7
	16	12	13
	17	13	17
	18	11	11
	18+	4	3
Grade at exit-	12	6	2
	11	12	12
	10	15	17
	9	10	18
	9-	1	7
Regularity of attendance junior high (No. of days absent)	0	3	2
	1-4	29	5
	5-10	9	4
	10-15	2	1
	15+	15	30
Regularity of attendance high school (No. of days absent)	0	4	3
	1-4	7	7
	5-10	11	5
	10-15	2	4
	15+	24	33
I.Q. -	45-70	2	20
	71-89	14	23
	90-110	17	17
	110+	4	3
Grade placement -	12	0	4
	11	11	7
	10	4	13
	9	6	9
	8	12	34

ITEM		NON	HAI
Years below grade-level in reading	1.0-2.0	3	8
	2.1-3.9	1	21
	4.0	6	61
Number of courses failed during last yr. -	1	7	7
	2	2	5
	3	6	3
	4	3	8
	5	25	34
Highest grade-father -	10	7	17
	11	20	12
	12	14	22
Occupation of father-	Unskilled	7	7
	Semiskilled	29	34
	Skilled	8	9
	Professional	1	4
Occupation of mother -	Unskilled	0	2
	Semiskilled	6	16
	Skilled	1	3
	Housewife	28	42
	Other	0	3
Pupil living arrangement -	Both parents	35	34
	Mother	2	12
	Father	9	8
Number of siblings at home	0	1	12
	1	9	28
	2	14	16
	3 or more	5	15
Economic status -	Low	27	44
	Middle	12	12
	High	1	4
Discipline record -	Yes	16	34
	No	22	28

TABLE I (CONT'D)

PERCENT OF RESPONSES ON SCHOOL RECORD INFORMATION

ITEM		NON	HANDI
Would re-enter school if help were given in ...	Special Placement	1	19
	Help find job	0	15
	Part-time schooling	0	15
	Day Care for Child	1	0
	Re-enroll	5	1
	Counseling	12	22
	Parental Problems	0	6
	None	16	1
Future plans -	Re-enroll	5	1
	G.E.D.	14	0
	Work	15	5
	Military	1	1
	Job Corp	1	1
	Vocational Training	5	1
	Marriage	0	1
	None	10	40
Parents contacted -	Yes	26	67
	No	6	1
Enrolled in Vocational Program?	Yes	1	13
	No	17	69

TABLE II

PERCENT OF FREQUENCY FOR INTERVIEW RESPONSES

ITEM	ANSWER	% OF TOTAL NONHANDICAPPED	% OF TOTAL HANDICAPPED
Best thing school does	Meet other people	5	5
	Teach reading	5	12
	Help in finding jobs	24	5
	Teach	0	9
Should more vocational education be offered?	Yes	15	77
	No	0	8
Teachers attitudes	Helpful	6	20
	Hard to talk to	23	26
	Unconcerned	10	10
	Don't know	0	3
Principal's attitude	Helpful	23	32
	Hard to talk to	9	18
	Unconcerned	4	14
Is there anything school could have done to make your leaving difficult?	Teachers interested	0	15
	Extra help with school work	10	6
	Fewer subjects and graduate in 5 years	0	6
	Work in school where could earn money	10	6
	Take more classes and graduate sooner	0	41
School subjects most important	Vocational	3	25
	Math	15	21
	English	3	12
	Social Studies	12	3
	Business	3	0
	Physical education	3	7
	Sciences	3	0
Why did you drop out of school?	Support my family	5	18
	Want a car	2	2
	Get married	5	5
	Job offer	14	3
	School uninteresting	2	3
	Problems with teacher/ principal	8	11
	Subjects difficult and had nothing to do with what I wanted	5	0
	Teachers punished me for what others did	2	2
	Couldn't afford school	0	11

TABLE II (CONT'D)

PERCENT OF FREQUENCY FOR INTERVIEW RESPONSES

ITEM	ANSWER	% OF TOTAL NONHANDICAPPED	% OF TOTAL HANDICAPPED
What subjects didn't you like?	Vocational	0	5
	Math	24	33
	English	24	5
	Social Studies	0	9